

Making an ass of oneself: Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*

Ian Repath

What would it be like to be turned into an animal but keep the mind of a person? Imagine what you could get up to, overhear, and experience if nobody knew you were human. On the other hand, what might happen to you if no one realized who you really were? This scenario is explored by Apuleius in his Latin novel the *Metamorphoses*, otherwise known as *The Golden Ass*, which was written some time in the late second century A.D. and which describes the adventures of someone called Lucius.

Lucius the man

Lucius, who narrates his story himself, travels to Thessaly in northern Greece on business. On his journey he joins two fellow travellers who are having an argument, with one accusing the other of lying about a story he has been telling. Lucius interrupts and says he is 'interested in unusual stories' and 'the type which likes to know about everything'. In other words, he is nosy! He encourages the man to tell the story again, saying that he is prepared to believe most things. Here we see Lucius presented as curious, a key character trait he retains after he is transformed.

The traveller tells Lucius the story, about a man who was ruined by having an affair with a witch. This witch is known to transform anyone she dislikes into some type of animal, including a beaver, a frog, and a ram. Because he was foolish enough to get involved with the witch, the man was reduced to poverty and eventually died a gruesome death. Lucius' reaction to this story tells us a great deal about him, since he says to the two travellers: 'Not only do I honestly believe our friend, but I am most grateful to him for distracting us with such an amusing and elegant tale'. If Lucius really does believe the traveller's story, then he does not seem to realize that it contains a warning about the dangers of getting mixed up in witchcraft. We will soon see that he is foolish not to have paid attention...

In fact, rather than put Lucius off, this tale excites him, and he wonders if he will see anything supernatural in the city he is visiting: 'I did not believe that anything which I gazed on in the city was merely what it was, but that every single object had been transformed into a different shape by some deadly spell.' Lucius is staying with a man called Milo and his wife, Pamphile. He is warned that Pamphile is a dangerous and evil witch, but this only arouses his curiosity further, and he says: 'I was all for taking a running jump and landing myself headlong in those murky depths.' Yet he is sensible enough not to approach her directly and instead seduces her maid, who he hopes will help him get closer to Pamphile.

Lucius the donkey

Lucius persuades the maid to let him witness Pamphile practising her magical arts. He sees the witch change herself into an owl. Lucius is spellbound: 'I was rooted to the ground with astonishment at this event, and I seemed to have become something other than Lucius.' This comment gives us a hint of what is about to happen. Lucius is determined to copy Pamphile and be changed into a bird himself. He persuades the maid to show

him what to do, and he covers himself with what they think is the same ointment. But he does not become an owl, and instead finds that 'the hair on my body was becoming coarse bristles, and my tender skin was hardening into hide'. His hands become hooves, he grows a tail, and says: 'My face became misshapen, my mouth widened, my nostrils flared open, my lips became saggy, and my ears huge and bristly'. Lucius has been transformed into a donkey, a shape he retains until the last part of the novel.

In the ancient world, not unlike today, donkeys were primarily used as working animals, and Lucius finds himself forced to undertake physical labour and is subjected to all sorts of violent and – for a human at least – degrading treatment. He is attacked by his own horse, stolen by robbers, forced to carry their loot, threatened, and beaten. This is just a taste of what he will experience while in his new form. Unfortunately for Lucius, there is nothing he can do about it, since he cannot talk or communicate with humans in any way, no matter how hard he tries.

However, being a donkey is not all bad, especially if you are as much of a busybody as Lucius. He says he finds nothing good about his new existence, 'except that I was revived by my innate curiosity, for no one took any account of my presence; they all freely did and said whatever they liked', and he follows this up by saying: 'when I was concealed in the ass's covering... I gained a knowledge of many things'.

Aside from the many sufferings and adventures Lucius undergoes himself, a large proportion of the novel consists of him telling stories which he observed or overheard. He appears to be proud of being able to tell all these tales, and throughout them we find common themes: sex, violence, deception, theft, greed, magic, adultery, and almost every other form of moral corruption imaginable. And it seems that donkeys are particularly well suited to eavesdropping, as Lucius explains: 'I was nevertheless heartened by one consolation at least in my hideous deformity: I was endowed with massive ears, and even at a distance I could very easily overhear all that was going on'. It seems that the nosy Lucius could hardly have been turned into a more appropriate creature!

Being turned into a donkey also enables Lucius to indulge his appetite for food, although in an unexpected way. At one point, he is sold to two brothers, one of whom is a confectioner, the other a cook. After work, they bring back the left-over food to the house and then go off to the baths. Lucius says that, left alone with all manner of delicacies, 'I was not such a fool or complete ass as to dine on prickly hay and leave all that delicious food untouched'. Eventually the brothers notice that the food they bring home is going missing, and so one day they pretend to go to the baths, but stay behind to spy on Lucius. The sight of a donkey gorging himself on human food is so funny that Lucius becomes a celebrity – before long he is drinking wine, reclining for dinner like a human, wrestling, dancing on two legs, and making signs by moving his head. Since Lucius is a donkey with a human mind, he already knows how to do all these things; in fact he is behaving much as he did before he was transformed. However, even he is not so foolish as to get carried away, since: 'I was afraid that if I did too many tricks without coaching as if I were human, people might think that this was sinister, slaughter me as a monstrous prodigy, and throw me as rich fare to the

vultures’.

Lucius’ new-found fame attracts a wealthy, married lady, who finds herself wanting to have sex with the donkey. The reason is not hard to guess when we consider the final aspect of his metamorphosis that Lucius mentions: ‘I could see no other consolation in this wretched transformation except for the fact my penis grew bigger’. Lucius, for his part, is worried about what he might do to the woman, but in fact he does her no harm at all and she greatly enjoys it. This behaviour also becomes known, and Lucius is lined up to have sex with a condemned woman at a public show. However, he is concerned for his safety, and manages to escape.

Lucius restored

Soon after, towards the end of the novel, Lucius has a vision of the goddess Isis. He prays to her, and she explains what he needs to do to be transformed back into a man. He does this successfully and then becomes a seemingly devoted disciple of Isis and also of the god Osiris, prepared to undergo anything in their service. This ending has puzzled readers for centuries. How serious is Apuleius being here? Is this in fact a religious work designed to inspire readers to follow the cult of Isis? Or is Apuleius merely tacking on an apparently serious ending to offset the depravity of what has gone before and make his novel seem a bit more respectable? Or is the truth somewhere in between? Since we cannot ask the author himself, it is up to the individual reader to answer these questions, and readers may find themselves having a different opinion each time they read the novel. But part of any interpretation must ask this question: how different is Lucius when he becomes a man again? Has his personality changed for the better? Or is he still the same old person – curious, keen on sex and fine food, and interested in telling stories?

I shall leave these questions open in the hope that you will read the *Metamorphoses* and attempt to answer them, and others, for yourself. Yet one thing about this entertaining and intriguing text is certain; as Apuleius says in the prologue: ‘Pay attention, dear reader, and you will be delighted’.

Ian Repath is a lecturer in the department of Classics at the University of Wales, Lampeter. He works on fiction in the Greco-Roman world, in particular the Greek and Latin novels.